

Promoting Independence Through Vision Rehabilitation

Vision loss is becoming a major public health concern in the United States. Millions of Americans have low vision, a visual impairment that cannot be corrected with standard glasses, contact lenses, medicine, or surgery. Low vision can affect activities of daily living; leisure pursuits; and educational, vocational, and social interactions. More than 2 million Americans have low vision. Low vision is most prevalent among older Americans. Certain racial and ethnic groups, including Hispanics/Latinos and African Americans, are also at an increased risk for low vision.

Eye diseases such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and cataract are the leading causes of visual impairment in people over the age of 65. With the aging of the population, these conditions are on the rise. The number of people who are blind or have low vision is projected to increase substantially by the year 2020.

People experiencing vision loss may have difficulty recognizing the faces of friends and relatives; performing everyday tasks such as reading, cooking, or sewing; picking out matching clothes; and reading street signs, even with regular glasses or contact lenses.

The consequences of vision loss may cause people to become confused, fearful, anxious, and depressed. Most people are not aware that numerous vision rehabilitation services are available to help them cope with their vision loss. While vision rehabilitation cannot restore lost sight, it can equip people with skills and strategies that will enable them to maintain an independent lifestyle. Vision rehabilitation helps people with visual impairments maximize the use of remaining vision, travel safely, take care of their home, meet career objectives, and enjoy leisure activities.

Vision rehabilitation services include clinical assessments, vision rehabilitation therapy, orientation and mobility training, counseling, and other support services for persons with visual impairments. Vision rehabilitation services can take place in numerous settings, including ophthalmology or optometry offices; hospital clinics; state, non-profit, or for-profit vision rehabilitation organizations; and

independent living centers. These services are provided by multidisciplinary teams of professionals, including ophthalmologists or optometrists specializing in low vision, vision rehabilitation therapists, orientation and mobility instructors, occupational therapists, social workers, rehabilitation counselors, and adaptive technology specialists.

These professionals work together to examine people who have visual impairments, prescribe and train them in the use of assistive technology and adaptive devices, and identify and incorporate new ways of helping patients perform tasks and get around their living environment. Visual and adaptive devices include both prescribed and nonprescribed devices that help people with low vision enhance their remaining vision. These devices include reading glasses with high-powered lenses; handheld magnifiers; video magnifiers; computers with large-print and speech-output systems; large-print reading materials; and talking watches, clocks, and calculators.

Vision rehabilitation services and adaptive devices can help to improve the quality of life for people with low vision. Patients with low vision should be encouraged to talk to their eye care professionals to learn about how they can make the most of their remaining vision. People at risk for low vision should have regular dilated eye exams, as early detection may prevent further vision loss.



Adaptive devices such as video magnifiers can help people with low vision enhance their remaining vision.

Additional Resources: The following Websites provide additional information and/or resources for people with low vision:

American Foundation for the Blind
www.afb.org/

Lighthouse International
www.lighthouse.org/
www.visionconnection.org

National Eye Institute
www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision/